To the Peace Table via the Hindenburg Line

The Terrible Lesson of the "German Desert" and Its Beggary to France

By Frank H. Simonds

PARIS, January 21.

THROUGH the courtesy of the British government I have come to the peace conference by way of the war zone. To travel directly from America, always at peace, to Paris, now resuming much of her ante-war activity and become again a real capital, is to forget almost entirely the four years and a half of agony that separated Europe and the rest of the world from July, 1914, and thus to eliminate many of the vital questions remaining to be settled. It is otherwise if one journeys by Ypres, by Vimy Ridge, by the Somme battlefields, by the regions where five years ago hundreds of thousands of people lived and labored amidst smiling fields and in pleasant towns, regions in which 2,000,000 dead now sleep and sleep in the midst of a desolation beyond human words to describe. I have seen battlefields in the hour of conflict, but in that time amidst the desolation and destruction there was still a sense of human energy which had become almost superhuman in its fury. The forces of destruction were themselves vital amidst all the waste which they created, but far more terrifying and terrible is the battlefield when the living are gone, when upon hundreds and thousands of square miles of territory there rests the blight of war.

In the "German Desert"

It is in the dead cities and even more in the dead villages of Northern France that one must seek evidence of what this German thing has meant, must seek some estimate of that vast account which remains to be settled. The German has gone. He has vanished out of the trenches, out of the ruins of the region he has wasted. His conquerors have gone after him, but the real inhabitants have not yet begun to return. As a consequence, from Ypres to the border of the Oise above Noyon, more than a hundred miles in longitude, and from a dozen to fifty miles in latitude, there exists the most appalling desert of which the mind can conceive—a few German prisoners cleaning débris from the more important highways, a few British soldiers standing guard over material, and for the rest in a land where three million French and Belgians lived five years ago, just nothing. Villages, forests, the fruit trees, and the garden shrubs, like the buildings, all gone. How, then, are the peace makers at Paris to set in motion the machinery, itself all to be made, which will bring the old inhabitants back to the German desert which, like the Great American Desert of the last century, separates two smiling regions? How are the millions of little people, with their flocks and their farm implements, to be returned? How are the Germans, who did this thing, to undo it?

In Paris one talks of the league of nations and the right of self-determination, but on the Hindenburg line one thinks of something more specific, more tangible. On the Hindenburg line I found a French woman who had come to look for the first time at what had been her home, the village in which she had been born, and her people time out of mind. I found her exhausted beside the road, after the thirty mile walk, her face again turned toward her place of exile. And this is what for her, for her children, her friends and neighbors the Hindenburg line was.

A Thing Ugly In Intention

My readers will recall how often I have written of this great system of defence, stretching from the Scarpe to the Somme; they will have visualized it as a fortification, as a system of intricate field works, with forts. In a certain sense this was exact, in another it was totally false. Here is what this French woman found in the very heart of the Hindenburg line facing Quéant.

Where the famous switch line began, facing Bullecourt, where once the Australians were slaughtered, surrounded on all sides by places whose names were in all the war news a few months ago, immediately before her was her own village. Of it there remained a few masses of riven masonry, endless heaps of brick and dust, formless masses of ruins, themselves half buried in ashes. Where the village church had stood a squat German dugout arose in stark ugliness, the single existing structure that had form. Looking north, east south or west from the gentle eminence on which the village stood, she looked out upon a land torn by shell fire until it resembled a skeleton rather than the flesh. Along every swell in the slopes actually behind it crumbling dugouts, ugly holes in the ground slowly sinking under the action of the rains, separated from each other by endless rows of barbed wire, sown everywhere with little crosses, themselves half fallen, where dead men were buried at hazard—this was her own country.

And beyond the nearer view, curve on curve, the land swelled away in all directions, a monotonous waste without a tree, without a single surviving habitation, without any obstacle to interrupt the vision—not a desert with clean sand, but a waste in which everything spoke of decay following death. For nearly twenty miles in either direction this desert extended. Eastward against the horizon was the skeleton of Bourlon Woods, where the first battle of Cambrai was won and lost in 1917. Westward was Arras, behind the slope, the city of a thousand bombardments, gone now to dust and ashes in the main. Here where there had been smiling villages, fertile fields and happy people was nothing but a desolation tragic beyond expression.

And all this was not the wreck of battles. It was nothing of the sort. In January, 1917, Hindenburg had said, "We shall retreat twenty miles, wasting the country to create a desert in front of us; thus we shall escape an Allied attack while we settle with Russia," and with German thoroughness the thing was done. The people were marched off to Belgium to be fed by American relief missions, or to die. The villages were destroyed, the roads mined, every living thing was cut down, every inanimate thing was blown up. So the German desert was created, and so it remains, sown now with millions of unexploded shells, the débris of late battles, with helmets and hand grenades, a region where every heap of ruins is a deadly peril, where the plough must reopen furrows among live shells.

France Will Yet Come Back

Yet by contrast there was the French woman, and she said quite simply, "Are we coming back? Of course we are coming back; as soon as the government will give us the barracks in which to live. We must get to work on our fields again. Yes, it will require courage to do this work, but we have courage. We must do it for the young, is it not so?" And that, as I said, is the problem, not of the French government alone, but of the Paris conference.

Somehow these thousands and hundreds of thousands of women and men who have courage must be brought back to these fields. Somehow the German who created the desert deliberately, wantonly, viciously, must be made to abolish it, to excavate the shells, to supply the labor and the material to furnish the new homes with what they stole from the old before they wrecked them, to return the machinery which they carted to Germany, to supply a beginning, for they took everything movable and destroyed everything that was immovable.

There is still another problem. You will find it at Lens if you follow in the footsteps of the Canadians over Vimy Ridge to the flat lands below. Here were the coal mines of France, surrounded by a score of little cities, model cities, with their well-ordered brick homes; cities of which Lens was but the most considerable. A hundred thousand people lived in these cities, lived in a degree of comfort which was unmistakable, and year by year brought up from the ground some 15,000,000 tons of coal, the greater share of the French supply and the very foundation of French industry.

And of all these little cities are left only vast heaps of splintered beams and smashed bricks. Mile on mile in all directions not a house stands. Into the mines the Germans turned the floods. Such machinery as they could not remove they smashed. Each house was treated to dynamite. The industry of destruction was unbelievable. City blocks were reduced to dust and straw mattresses, fallen by the wayside, were picked clean of the straw. It was as if the contract had called for utter ruin, and the Germans' life had depended upon the completeness of the destruction.

Gone, but Not Forgotten!

In the centre of Lens a returned citizen was searching amid the ruins of his store for a well, down which he had lowered valuable papers, and he could not find the well; even so well defined an objective was beyond his resources, destruction was so complete. And the story of Lens was this. When the German found he could not stay he resolved that France should still be dependent upon Germany for coal; that she should still be crippled for an endless time. So, systematically, he destroyed the mines, the machinery, the dwelling houses; he took the furniture. I do not know how words can describe the monstrous, the amazing miracle of destruction he accomplished in the Lens district.

He is gone now. But the problem remains. He wasted the fields that the peasants might not return. He destroyed the cities and the mines, that the industrial population might not come back, that this region and this portion of France might die, and now, when the German peasants are returning to their undisturbed farms, to their undamaged industrial centres and their intact factories, the people of Northern France are still exiles.

I hope my American friends will think of the German desert which occupies so much of Northern France when the peace conference begins its work. If the French ask the possession of the Saar coal district (once theirs and stolen by the Germans in 1814) to replace the ruined coal fields of Artois and Flanders, I trust that the Americans will not see in this demand French imperialism, but the effort of France to resume the business of life in spite of the German effort permanently to destroy French industries. And in the same sense, if there is discussion of compelling Germany to supply labor to remove the shells, plough the fields and open the roads, I hope that the Americans will think that the French are not seeking revenge, but a way to repair the most brutal of all injuries and permit their exiles to return home again; the exiles who, like the French woman at Croisilles, have courage, but have lost everything else.

These Perished In Vain?

And in the Paris conference there is to be talk of the responsibility not alone for the acts of war after the contest itself came, but for the causing of the war. If only one could translate into words that had a meaning the fact of the dead and deserted battlefields, that shell torn region one looks down upon from Kemmel and from Scharfenberg, the region that was once the Ypres salient! At least half a million men died there. A few sleep in graves, but for the most part they and their graves have been ground up in the never ending pound of ceaseless bombardments.

A year ago every ridge, every slope, every heap of dust and ashes had its military value and an historic meaning. Men died by the thousand to advance a few hundred yards; but now all the hills and ruins have been as it were demonetized. They have no further value. The Germans lost them, the British advanced beyond, the war has gone and peace cannot return. Half a million dead remain, but nothing for which they fought to the end is worth a second thought, nothing in the material facts. And the Hindenburg line, the Somme battlefields, it is the same thing in both cases. A million and a half of dead sleep between the Yser and the Somme, but in the lands they died to hold no living thing stays, save a few prisoners and their guards. The trenches disintegrate in the rain, the barbed wire rusts in the brown of the landscape, the snake grass is beginning to bury everything.

And for all this some one must pay, not as a matter of punishment, that is another question; but some one must pay in order that this part of the German plan may not prevail, that this much of civilization may not perish, that this corner of France may not die. In Flanders, Artois, Picardy, you get the full measure of the German fury of destruction. A more terrible force one cannot imagine. It has wasted provinces and destroyed cities. Nothing has been too small or too great to elude Germany run amuck. The passion that is almost elemental in its magnitude of destructive force at one moment seems guided by microscopic vision at the next. One must see what the Germans did to understand something of what Germany was and may be again when a few decades have passed.

Things America Must Remember

I have dwelt upon these circumstances at this time because it seems to me that Americans must understand in some measure the mood and temper of France to-day. It is the tragedy which has not been abolished by the armistice, it is the ruin which no formula of words and sentiments can abolish. The men who planned and guided this thing are in the main alive and unpunished. At least a million French women and children are still practically homeless. Years must pass before the open wound which stretches from Belgium to Switzerland can be healed, if at all, and it will remain an open wound forever in the side of France if France and not the Germans have to carry the burden. And yet, save for the French in Paris and out of it, one feels a certain tendency to forget this German desert. The German is singing a new tune now. His humility is as complete as was his arrogance a year ago. The French woman told me how her German master made her work in the fields close up to the firing line, growing potatoes, and then allowed her two a day to live on; yet the German now imperiously demands that we feed him while his victims remain without all that which they must have if they are to begin life again.

Over in Germany the Germans are feeding our soldiers with words and with provisions, carrying on a monstrous propaganda with something of the success they had in a similar work in America not so long ago. In Paris the peace conference reports concentrate upon the Adriatic problem, the Polish readjustments, while the question of the Kingdom of the Hedjaz threatens to shorten the lives of statesmen and diplomats alike.

But by automobile one may almost in a moment reach the old German line, and it is hardly three hours to the German-made desert of the Somme. And these deserts present the problems I have mentioned, problems of restitution, reparation and restoration. As it stands, the German has lost the war, but before he lost the war he ruined half of Northern France, and if he does not repay his factories will profit, his laborers gain, and glory will be to the victor, but the dividends to the vanquished, who only fought while victory seemed possible and grounded his arms when the battle approached his factories and fields.

This Bill Must Be Paid

It is not a hymn of hate that I am trying to sing. There is no longer any room for emotion. The war is over, the futility of the German methods carries a final judgment; but either the German must pay or the French and Belgian people stagger under the burden of his terrible destruction, while the German, escaping the burden, recuperates for a new adventure. He expects to escape. A year ago he was starving millions; to-day he openly demands that the world feed him. His propaganda is everywhere at work, in Paris and out of it, and such a small part of the non-military part of the world as thinks of the German desert, knows it as it exists, that one fears that the world will forget.

To-day I talked with an American journalist flaming with fury because in some fashion his precious comment was delayed or lost in transit, to the great injury of the freedom of the press. I talked with a British colonel, keen to erect a new Hedjaz kingdom under the sympathetic eye of America. The frontiers of Poland move with the tides; a new map of Asia Minor is made each hour, and the islands of the Ægean change hands every moment, but in the midst of all this diplomatic discussion, the mingling of idealism and realism, international romance and high finance, I find myself constantly thinking of the ruined cities, of the wasted fields and the forlorn graves of the north. Shall we forget them all in Paris, and if we do shall we not invite the German to come again, however lofty a structure we raise in the name of the league of nations?

Victory to France, but the Dividends to Germany, Unless the Peace Council Wakes Up

Some Trust! Farmers, Too, 60,000 of Them

By Charles W. Stokes

ONE fine day some enthusiastic trust-buster will go up into Western Canada and bump into a really large trust—one with over 60,000 subscribing members. Somewhat remarkably, although it controls the selling price of its product, it is rather an amiable kind of a trust, and shares its profits on a coöperative basis; and, most extraordinary thing of all, is composed entirely of farmers. None of your ladylike orange growers or apple orchardists, either, who merely use a central agency to sell produce under a trademark, but regular dyed-in-the-wool farmers who wear overalls, have calloused palms, and raise difficult things like wheat and cattle. About the very last people in the world, in fact, who would be suspected of self-organization, but, in the sequel, the most notably successful.

This trust, if such it can be called, is nominally composed of five separate units. These are the Manitoba Grain Growers' Association, the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association, the United Farmers of Alberta, the United Grain Growers, Limited, and the Saskatchewan Coöperative Elevator Company. The first three represent what may be called the educational side of the trust and the remaining two the trading side, but as all the stock in the trading companies is held by members of the educational associations, and as the former, in fact, finance the propaganda of the latter, the two branches dovetail so exactly that jointly they comprise a somewhat outstanding and significant movement which in the West is generally known as the "grain growers' movement."

The Farmers Say "No"

When, in the fall of 1917, the Canadian government abolished its historic two-party system of Liberals and Conservatives and established a "Union" party, thereby consolidating all political creeds in a single unified win-the-war programme, it offered the portfolio of Minister of Agriculture to T. A. Crerar, president and general manager of the United Grain Growers, Limited, a business man who had never entered political life or aspired to parliamentary honors. That portfolio, which Mr. Crerar accepted and holds very ably, testified to the powerful position that the grain growers' movement had attained. But what really made the general public first sit up and take notice that a new force had arisen in their midst was that the "trust" was almost entirely responsible for the principle of fixing wheat prices on this continent at an equitable price to the grower.

In the spring of 1917, before the United States entered the war, wheat stood at about $1.75 per bushel, but had wildly fluctuated during the preceding twelve months, ranging from $1.06 to $1.91, and was climbing steadily higher. The British government had fixed a minimum price for home-grown wheat of about $1.82, had bought the whole available surplus of Australia at about $1.12 and controlled the surplus crops of India and Egypt. Acting, therefore, as an intermediary for the British government, Sir George Foster, Canadian Minister of Trade and Commerce, approached the Canadian Council of Agriculture, which is a consolidation of all the five organizations mentioned above, with the offer of $1.30 a bushel for their entire 1917 crop, before it was sown, this price to be f. o. b. Fort William, at the head of the Great Lakes. Much to his and the general surprise, the council refused his offer, and named as the lowest acceptable the flat rate of $1.70, or preferably a guarantee of prices from a minimum of $1.50 to a maximum of $1.90. Taking into consideration the tremendously increased cost of production, the organized farmers of Western Canada defend their seeming profiteering by submitting that there was no moral obligation upon them to produce wheat at a loss or lower than the British farmer—a price, in fact, which would have the opposite result of discouraging wheat production. The government felt this figure was too high, but a very few months later, in concert with the action of the United States government, itself fixed the price at $2.21. There is very little doubt that had the price of wheat not been fixed it would to-day be around $3 or $4. It actually touched $3 in May, 1917; so that on both counts the farmers' offer would in the upshot have been to the national advantage.

But how came the farmers to possess these unexpected powers of saying "no"? The farmer had hitherto been the ultimate goat, to whom the world successfully passed the buck of low prices. Practically alone of all prime producers, the farmer was the only one who did not control the selling price of his commodity, based upon cost of production plus handling charges, but had to take what the world would give him. The more there was of his one commodity in the market, the less he got. The answer lies in the fact that while in 1906, its first year, the one farmers' trading company handled less than 3 per cent of the total volume of grain exported from Western Canada, which was roughly 70,000,000 bushels, in 1917 the two companies handled about 30 per cent of about 250,000,000 bushels, or more than the total output of the country ten years previously.

Three Millions In Capital

These two companies (the United Grain Growers, Ltd., being a recent amalgamation of the previously existing Grain Growers Grain Company and the Alberta Farmers Coöperative Elevator Company) have 60,000 shareholders, composed entirely of working farmers, roughly, one in three of the total number of owners or tenants of farms in the three prairie provinces, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. The companies have a paid up capitalization of $3,000,000, with reserve funds of another $2,000,000. They have assets of over $12,0000,000, and last year paid dividends of 10 and 8 per cent, respectively. Since the beginning of the war they have paid over $1,000,000 war taxes in cold cash. They operate between them 606 country grain elevators, two large public and two large private elevators at the head of the Great Lakes, where western grain first enters commerce. The United Grain Growers' Company conducts a grain exporting business, with headquarters at New York, which prior to the war was one of the largest grain exporting concerns on the continent and is now in the service of the Allied governments. And all this has been accomplished in the short duration of twelve years, in a field strewn with the wrecks of farmers' coöperative companies, granges and societies of equity!

Nor are the interests of these companies confined entirely to grain selling. They handle livestock for their shareholders—about 3,000 carloads of cattle, hogs and sheep passed through their hands last year. But apart from this, they not only sell their shareholders' output; they also sell to them. Since their original conception, they have entered on a considerable scale into the handling of a large portion of the staple goods necessary for their members' requirements. Their collective buying power is enormous, and their unique system of internal distribution, the "local" sending in its requisition to headquarters for a large district, entails that practically the whole of the saving effected in wholesale buying is passed on to the individual member. Over $7,000,000 worth of coöperative trading is now done annually—coal, flour, machinery, fencing, lumber, apples, groceries, and so on. The combination owns 300,000,000 feet of standing lumber in British Columbia. It owns a land company for the sale of lands. It owns a weekly paper—the "Grain Growers' Guide," one of the brightest and "different" agricultural publications on the continent.

How the Trust Started

The actual "grain growers' movement" began in 1901, at the little town of Indian Head, Saskatchewan, when a group of farmers from the Northwest territories stayed in their chairs in a corner of the municipal hall after the conclusion of a debate between two well known politicians, which debate really had nothing to do with what happened subsequently. That group of serious faced men, hardened and determined looking, were not there entirely by accident. They had assembled as the result of a call that had gone over the whole country, summoning some of the prominent settlers to consider the grievous conditions which affected not only themselves, but every farmer between Winnipeg and the Rocky Mountains, and to discuss the abuses and hardships under which they were living and working. The man who had taken the initiative in organizing that little after-meeting was W. R. Motherwell, now Minister of Agriculture for the province of Saskatchewan.

The conditions at the beginning of the present century which led to the rapid organization of the grain growers' associations were characteristic, perhaps, of the circumstances which have stimulated revolutionary movements throughout history. For nearly twenty years the farmers had been growing restless and discontented under the conditions they were compelled to face. Between the early '80s and 1900 there were no regulations directing or controlling the wheat trade. Those were the days of 30 and 40 cent wheat. "I had been very much impressed," Mr. Motherwell has since said, "with the necessity of a permanent organization among the farmers to represent the special requirements of the grain growing interests of the country, to press persistently for an improvement of market conditions, transportation, warehousing, and for the introduction of amended legislation from time to time. A campaign to organize local associations was undertaken immediately, with the gratifying result that when the first grain growers' conference was held, two months later, no less than 38 locals were represented."

Real Canada Parliaments

From this small beginning has grown these three numerically strong, highly successful and tremendously powerful agricultural organizations of to-day, perhaps the only really successful example of agricultural coöperation, and certainly one of the most interesting studies in the coöperation of a large body of prime producers. The commercial ventures floated during the subsequent years as independent companies, the stock of which is held entirely by members of the other organizations, have enabled them to develop their educational aims. The annual four-day conventions of the three associations are the real parliaments of Middle Western Canada. It would surprise a casual visitor, going to one of these conventions and expecting merely a short course in agricultural science, to find instead a thousand or more enthusiastic farmers debating, with considerable ability, almost everything except the practice of farming. The records of these conventions show that besides recommending to the provincial and federal governments the establishment of coöperative elevators, banks, dairies and trading associations, free trade, single tax, and many other economic reforms, the grain growers urged women's suffrage many years before that measure was generally favored and were almost the first sponsors in Canada of the ideas of direct legislation and proportional representation.

The action that has been obtained upon many of these recommendations, especially during the last few years since the power of the associations has been clearly demonstrated, is the greatest testimony to their determination. In the federal field, too, the influence of the grain growers has made itself felt with greater force every year, and as the directors of public opinion in the western country the associations have become an increasingly important factor in determining national affairs.

Theodore Roosevelt

January 6, 1919

I

On what divine adventure has he gone?
Beyond what peaks of dawn
Is he now faring? On what errand blest
Has his impulsive heart now turned? No rest
Could be the portion of his tireless soul.
He seeks some frenzied goal
Where he can labor on till Time is not,
And earth is nothing but a thing forgot.

II

Pilot and Prophet! as the years increase
The sorrow of your passing will not cease.
We love to think of you still moving on
From sun to blazing sun,
From planet to far planet, to some height
Of clear perfection in the Infinite,
Where with the wise Immortals you can find
The Peace you fought for with your heart and mind.
Yet from that bourne where you are journeying
Sometimes we think we hear you whispering,
"I went away, O world so false and true,
I went away—with still so much to do!"

—CHARLES HANSON TOWNE